

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000050

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [YM](#) [COUNTER TERRORISM](#)

SUBJECT: ROYG FREES ITALIAN HOSTAGES: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR FUTURE OF KIDNAPPING?

REF: A. 2005 SANAA 3614

[B.](#) SANAA 0002

Classified By: AMBASSADOR THOMAS C. KRAJESKI, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: On January 6, tribesmen released unharmed five Italian tourists that had been held hostage since January 1 (ref A). Breaking from a long-standing policy of granting concessions without legal consequences, the ROYG pursued a successful dual-track strategy of negotiating through tribal leaders while using counter-terrorism forces to pressure the kidnappers. It is not clear what the ROYG had to concede during the negotiations (if anything) but security forces arrested several individuals involved with the kidnapping. Although ROYG officials vowed to seek the death penalty for anyone convicted of kidnapping foreigners, it is not at all clear what punishment the ROYG will actually seek. The fact is that to date, no Yemeni has ever been executed solely for kidnapping.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY CONTINUED: Whatever the sentence handed down for these latest kidnappings, the ROYG has sent a strong message, albeit a belated one, to the tribes by demonstrating its ability to apply both political and military pressure to isolate kidnappers and bring them to justice. The ROYG's success in implementing this new approach, without provoking a backlash from a powerful and dangerous tribe with past links to terrorists (ref B), is an important sign that when fundamentally challenged, the central government is still capable of responding and winning. End Summary.

Safe Release of Hostages

¶3. (S) Members of the Jahm tribe released five Italian tourists unharmed during the early morning of January 6. The Ministry of Interior's U.S.-trained Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU), which had surrounded the kidnappers' compound, immediately arrested the kidnappers after the hostages' release. According to security forces, one of the kidnappers arrested was an "Afghan Arab" who had fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Others involved in the kidnapping are also suspected of being engaged in smuggling activity across the Yemeni-Saudi border.

¶4. (C) The CTU originally deployed to the area on January 2 as a show of force, while negotiations between government officials, tribal leaders, and the kidnappers continued. Initially, the exact location of the hostages was unknown. The CTU, using skills learned through USG-sponsored training, successfully tracked the kidnappers, cordoned off the area to prevent them from moving the hostages to a more remote and inaccessible location, and cut off water supplies. The Italian Ambassador expressed concern that any rescue attempt would place the hostages in danger and requested that the ROYG first exhaust negotiations. In the end, no force was necessary and the hostages were released without incident as helicopter-borne CTU forces closed in on the huts where the tourists were being held.

¶5. (C) While the details of any settlement remain unknown, the ROYG had been negotiating with the kidnappers through a Member of Parliament from the opposition Islah party. The kidnappers had demanded the release of other tribal members being held by the ROYG for unclear reasons. As part of negotiations, the ROYG successfully managed to convince the tribal leaders to repudiate the members involved and condemn the kidnapping publicly.

¶6. (U) As negotiations and CTU pressure continued, the ROYG waged a media campaign to convince the tribes that the government would no longer deal lightly with the kidnapping of foreigners. On January 4, the ROYG announced that anyone convicted of kidnapping a foreigner would receive the death penalty. The ROYG also reportedly sped up the sentencing for several people previously convicted of kidnapping, in order to apply the death penalty. (Note: While a 1998 Yemeni law permits the death penalty for any kidnapping, no death sentence has ever been handed down for kidnapping alone. On two previous occasions, convicted kidnappers were sentenced to death, but only because they were also convicted of murder as part of the same crime. End Note)

Comment

17. (C) Comment: The release of the hostages without the use of lethal force was the best possible outcome for the ROYG. While the CTU is Yemen's most capable security force, its limited rescue skills would have likely put the hostages in great danger. In the interest of maintaining peace with the tribes, the ROYG appears content with the isolation of the kidnappers by tribal leaders and has not sought retribution against the greater tribe. Had security forces used overwhelming force against the kidnappers or attacked tribal members elsewhere, the security situation in the oil-rich region would have likely deteriorated even further.

18. (C) Comment continued: The ROYG clearly realized that its previous policy of appeasing kidnappers and not pursuing those involved only exacerbated the problem, resulting in four kidnapping incidents within the last six weeks. By deploying the CTU, the ROYG demonstrated its ability and willingness to use force if necessary, especially on a tribe it already considers problematic. Combined with the arrest of the kidnappers and a tough media campaign, the ROYG is now making a serious attempt to demonstrate that it can stop the tribes from using kidnapped foreigners as a tool to win concessions from the central government. The true test for maintaining security in the area, however, will be if the ROYG focuses on the underlying causes of kidnapping, which is a lack of governmental control in many impoverished tribal areas and a weak legal system that lacks any effective conflict resolution mechanism.

Krajeski